

“We’re from the government. We’re here to help.”¹
A review of INSTRUCTION TO DELIVER (2008), by Sir Michael Barber
Rich Haglund² - November 2011

“Reforms are like London buses,” one public servant told me in the 1990s: “It doesn’t really matter if you miss one because there’ll be another one along in a minute.”³

In 2009, the State Board of Education raised the graduation requirements for all Tennessee students, and required increased rigor on State mandated tests that were first implemented in the spring of 2010. Tennessee was one of the first recipients of a federal Race to the Top grant in 2010. The State received \$500 million over four years to meet the goals set out in its application. Tennessee is employing significantly changed teacher evaluation models during the 2011-12 school year, and will now require annual evaluations, based at least 50% on the academic achievement of the students for whom teachers are responsible.

What can the State government do—and what might school and district leaders do—to ensure that these and other recent reforms to Tennessee public education are not seen as just another bunch of reforms to be replaced in a few years? Or, as Barber posed it, “How does a government . . . ensure that the vast bureaucracies that are government departments and the even vaster public services . . . actually deliver measurable improvements in performance within a three- to four-year period?”⁴ This is a critical question. Failure to follow policy changes with consistent implementation is likely to lead to inconclusive results that are interpreted as insufficient results, leading to “new” efforts to reform the reforms that supposedly didn’t work.⁵ Especially now, when resources are increasingly limited, successful implementation of promising ideas is crucial.

If they are to be universal, modern public services have to be so good that the growing numbers of people who can afford the private alternative still choose them. This is a much higher bar than prevailed in the twentieth century. It is of decisive importance because, in the long run, the relatively wealthy will be willing to pay taxes for public services only if they use them.⁶

¹ Ronald Reagan said, at a 1986 Future Farmers of America event, “There seems to be an increasing awareness of something we Americans have known for some time: that the 10 most dangerous words in the English language are, ‘Hi, I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help.’” Remarks to Representatives of the Future Farmers of America, University of Texas, available at <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1988/072888c.htm> (last viewed Nov. 18, 2011).

² Rich Haglund is Director of Charter Schools at the [Tennessee Department of Education](http://www.tennessee.gov/education/fedprog/Charter_Sch_Presentations.shtml). The views in this review do not, however, necessarily represent the views of the Department. Additional reviews are available online at http://www.tennessee.gov/education/fedprog/Charter_Sch_Presentations.shtml.

³ Michael Barber, *INSTRUCTION TO DELIVER* 72 (2008).

⁴ *Id.* at 71.

⁵ Barber defined the “modern politician’s dilemma” this way: “You have to have a long-term strategy but unless it delivers short-term results no one will believe you.” *Id.* at 75.

⁶ *Id.* at 128.

This review of INSTRUCTION TO DELIVER focuses on just one of the four foundational elements of the State Board of Education's Master Plan: effective leaders.⁷ Barber's book offers insights applicable to education leaders at the state, district and school level.

Asking the Same Old Questions Again . . . and Again

Sir Michael Barber worked in the British government as Chief Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education on School Standards. During Prime Minister Tony Blair's second term, Barber led the the prime minister's Delivery Unit, which was charged with helping different agencies (including education and health) work successfully toward their stated goals.

The "essence of the Delivery Unit" was five questions, asked "calmly and persistently:"

- What are you trying to do?
- How are you trying to do it?
- How do you know you are succeeding?
- If you're not succeeding, how will you change things?
- How can we help you?⁸

Barber's team approached its work to achieve "reliable, evidence-based answers to [its] five questions"⁹ in a manner consistent with the following principles:

- Keeping the [chief executive] well informed about his key priorities
- Consistent pursuit of those priorities
- Data and evidence
- Plain speaking
- Early identification of problems
- Imaginative problem-solving
- Application of best practice
- Recognizing differences as well as similarities between departments
- The expectation of success¹⁰

Effective leaders do not let debates about the future type or means of provision of education distract from the work of delivering quality education to today's student consumers. "My main contribution," Barber wrote, "was to prevent the attention on, and conflict over, future strategy deflecting the government from delivering its current programme."¹¹ Leaders need to maintain this focus particularly during election seasons. "There is a real tendency across

⁷ State Board of Education Master Plan, available at <http://tn.gov/sbe/masterplan.htm> (last viewed Nov. 22, 2011).

⁸ *Id.* at 73.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 64-65. Barber wrote that the unit also sought to avoid the following:

- Micro –management
- Generating bureaucracy or unnecessary work
- Getting in the way
- Policy wheezes
- Being driven by headlines
- Short-termism
- Opinion without evidence
- Changing the goalposts

¹¹ *Id.* at 208-9.

Whitehall to slacken the pace as an election looms—in fact it becomes an excuse for taking it easy. To me this is morally unacceptable. After all, public money keeps being spent and the public has every right to expect the civil service to strive for the fullest possible value from every pound spent, election or no election.”¹² Such is the case, for example, in Shelby County, where a merger between the county and city school districts is underway.

What am I delivering, and how?

Effective leaders allow those responsible for delivery to define how they plan to deliver services. Barber’s Delivery Unit did not provide templates for departments to fill in with their delivery plans. Instead, Barber wrote, “We wanted real, messy, practical, operational plans with folds and creases, scribbled notes in the margins and coffee stains.”¹³ This approach increased not only the performance of agencies, but the job satisfaction of officials:

Interestingly, as time went by, once officials had clarified the delivery chain and started to exert influence along it, they found that their jobs were much more worthwhile. Many civil servants, after all, had embarked on their careers motivated by the thought of making a difference, only to become ground down by the inertia of the machine of which they had become a part. Often we found we had reignited their motivation; they were once again making a difference.¹⁴

This evidence also underscores the need for education leaders to get out and see the full delivery chain—to visit the schools and teachers and children whose teaching and learning environment the leaders’ policies affect. “Unless civil servants make an effort, they can easily become detached, spending a lifetime in departmental meetings and distant from the services for whose outcomes they find themselves responsible. Worse still, they often have no idea what impact the policies they are in charge of have on the ground.”¹⁵

Clarifying the method of delivery highlights the characteristics required of transformative leaders. Because “the solutions lie not in one simple remedy, but in the sustained implementation of a combination of actions, . . . the qualities required most by those responsible for policy are a positive attitude and, above all, the capacity to learn rapidly.”¹⁶ Barber added that trying to improve performance through complex program implementation renders the ability to “[make] it up as you go along” . . . essential because it is not possible to know everything you need to know at the outset.”¹⁷ School leaders and teachers need this capacity to effectively implement new standards, teaching and evaluation tools, and simply to adjust to the students who are new every year!¹⁸

¹² *Id.* at 246.

¹³ *Id.* at 84.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 87.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 90.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Barber recognizes that delegating responsibility requires a “corresponding strengthening of the quality of leadership.” *Id.* at 105.

How do I know if I'm succeeding?

Effective leaders recognize that answering this question for the first time requires some guess work. “For many people, the sheer complexity of finding an answer is enough to deter them from even making the attempt.”¹⁹ Barber’s Delivery Unit thought that officials should make the best informed guess [they] can and then to see what in fact happens.”²⁰ Officials “can then review the assumptions behind the guess in the light of the real data as it comes in and refine the analysis. In other words, the combination of the trajectory and the actual data enables constant learning.”²¹ Skilled leaders can solve problems quickly, even if they start with “guesstimates”: “If the data comes in fast enough for the system to be able to respond in time, and if those using the data have the right ‘can-do’ mindset, then problems can be solved before they become crises or outright failures.”²²

Effective leaders need to be able to “find out rapidly and frequently what impact policies were having at ground level.”²³ Otherwise, they will be “unable to assess progress regularly and refine implementation where necessary.”²⁴ When they do have this information, they can make human capital and other decisions in an effective, timely manner. Hospitals, Barber noted, can see when the peak times in an Emergency Room are, and change staffing plans to meet those needs.²⁵ But, this data has to be sufficient, and updated on a regular basis.

Not only does readily available, useful data help prevent crises; such information also allows leaders to redirect resources (including mental energy consumed by worry) away from the working parts of a delivery unit to those that need extra help. “Once the data told you a policy was working, you could cease to regulate altogether and free entirely those parts of the system that were delivering excellent results, instead focusing efforts on the underperforming parts. By contrast, if you did not have the data, you would end up having to regulate everybody.”²⁶ School district leaders can treat individual schools this way if the data demonstrates that the leadership of a particular school (the principal or a school governing body) is succeeding in meeting agreed upon goals.

Effective leaders use meetings to measure and communicate the effectiveness of delivery. Barber’s team had regular “stocktakes” with particular leaders, including the prime minister. A stocktake, Barber said, is “a formal conversation about performance based on evidence.”²⁷ Those kinds of meetings should focus on performance and a few priorities, be attended by the key leaders, and should include data that is “shared and accepted by everyone present.”²⁸ On the shared data question, Barber explained why both raw achievement and growth data for students are important to measure: “The value-added figures show what contribution individual schools [or teachers] are making, which is important; the raw figures reveal where the biggest challenges are in achieving universal high standards and focus the system on those standards, which is even

¹⁹ *Id.* at 89.

²⁰ *Id.* at 90.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.* at 105.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 167.

²⁶ *Id.* at 219.

²⁷ *Id.* at 94.

²⁸ *Id.* at 92.

more important.”²⁹ In other words, helping students make two years of progress each school year should not be a satisfactory result if those students still leave the school unprepared for what’s next: secondary or post-secondary education or workforce training.

Effective leaders should have a single person responsible for accountability. The third question Barber suggests effective leaders ask is, “If you’re not succeeding, how will you change things?” For accountability to serve as motivation for improvement, Barber found that there had to be a “single named official who was personally responsible for the delivery of each priority. This should be the person who spends most of his/her time on the priority and has sleepless nights, worrying about hitting the targets.”³⁰ And this individual had to be focused on serving customers by delivering great results, not focused on compliance for its own sake. Barber emphasizes this point with a quote from Tony Blair about why the armed forces were critical in stemming an outbreak of foot and mouth disease: “The blunt truth is that it was the armed forces’ intervention that was critical to delivery. Why? Because they didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer; they used rules as a means to an end, not an end in themselves.”³¹

Public Services and Private Consumption

Effective leaders understand what is public about the services they are delivering and what roles non-government entities may have in helping deliver those services—which are all consumed by private individuals. Effective leaders focus on ensuring delivery of the services the government has a duty to provide to citizens, and less on the type of organization delivering the services.

Laws, passed by elected officials, dictate what kinds of services will be made available and at what cost, to citizens of a governed community—a city, state or nation. Legislators have authority to create government entities that will participate in the provision and/or regulation of those services. The government determines how engaged it will be in the provision and regulation of specific services.

For some services, the government provides services in a vertically integrated manner. Just like a business that manufactures, distributes and sells a product, the government may be the sole member of a delivery chain. For example, Tennessee driver’s licenses are issued by the State after an individual has passed a written test approved by the State and a driving test in the company of a Department of Safety official.

For some services, the government dictates the type services to be delivered and the manner in which they will be delivered, but does not actually provide the services. For example, Tennessee laws passed by the legislature and regulations promulgated by the State Board of Education and Department of Safety dictate what specifications school buses must meet to be used by Tennessee schools. The State of Tennessee does not manufacture the buses, and drivers of the school buses need not be employees of a local school board. The Department of Safety inspects buses to ensure compliance. Similarly, the State Fire Marshal inspects school buildings for compliance with health and safety laws established by the legislature, but State agencies do not build school buildings.

Tennessee’s Constitution and laws require a system of free public education to be available to all residents of the State, regardless of gender, race, national origin, or eligibility for

²⁹ *Id.* at 96.

³⁰ *Id.* at 106.

³¹ *Id.* at 205.

special education services.³² Tennessee laws dictate that all students of a certain age attend school, and the laws also specify requirements for teachers and curricula in all types of schools: public schools, private schools and homeschools. Local boards of education are charged with ensuring that all students satisfy mandatory attendance laws (by attending any approved school). But, neither the State nor individual schools or their employees are required to write textbooks, build schools, write payroll software, install fiber optic cable for communication, manufacture desks or computers or chalkboards, sew backpacks, make school lunches or administer sports physicals.

“The aim,” Barber wrote, “is to reap the benefits of a market in terms of innovation and productivity while enhancing equity and other values, which are central to the public services.”³³

As Blair once explained to me, a fundamental problem with the debate about the public services has been that “people fail to distinguish between outcomes or ethos, which are distinctive for public services, and a lot of the management of a public service, which is actually identical to business and [to which] best business practices . . . is central. So the National Health Service at one level is values driven but at another level of course it is a business.”³⁴

Barber provides a thorough look at combinations of government and non-government efforts in the provision of public services, but notes that the government cannot delegate the following responsibilities: establishing “the capacity, capability and culture of the system,”³⁵ “managing the overall performance of the system,”³⁶ and providing “a strategic direction.”³⁷

Barber quoted Tony Blair’s explanation of this approach to the provision of services by the government:

Globalisation is profoundly changing the nature of our society. It forces businesses and people to step up a gear simply to keep abreast with the pace of change: commercial transactions are completed without delay; communications happen instantly: goods can be moved rapidly across huge distances.

Government is not immune to these changes. For it to continue to maintain its legitimacy, it needs to change its outlook radically. The technological innovations driving global change have not just opened up new opportunities for delivering services, but increased people’s expectations of what they want from those who serve them.

To meet these challenges the State must provide the same level of customer service as the public have come to expect in every other aspect of their lives. To achieve this, the role of the State is not to control, but to enable. Making modern public services the cornerstone of the enabling state—where the State provides strategic direction not micro-management—requires a transformation of how we deliver our services.³⁸

³² Tennessee Constitution Article XI, Section 12.

³³ *Id.* at 338.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at 339.

³⁶ *Id.* at 340.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.* at 334-335.

Of course, private businesses contracting with schools, school districts or the State may not meet the expectations of the government entity or the private consumer of these public services. That is not, Barber explains, a reason to stop outsourcing the provision of government services. Instead, it is “an argument for getting better at [outsourcing].”³⁹

Outsourcing occurs at every level of elementary and secondary education in Tennessee. The General Assembly has outsourced the “implementation of laws or policies established by the general assembly or the state board of education” to the Department of Education.⁴⁰ Local boards of education “manage and control all public schools established or that may be established under its jurisdiction.”⁴¹ Superintendents, chosen by local boards of education, supervise principals who are to oversee “the operation and management of the personnel and facilities of the school” and “assume administrative responsibility and instructional leadership.”⁴²

When any one entity providing a portion of the service—in this case, education—performs unsatisfactorily, that does not necessarily mean that the government agency overseeing that entity’s work should stop contracting with other entities (local boards of education, school principals, school governing boards, textbook publishers, etc.). But it does suggest that the entity charged by the legislature with ensuring the standards it has set are met should get better at outsourcing the provision of that part of the education the State is constitutionally obligated to provide. For example, the revocation of a charter by a local board of education is not necessarily a reason to take the power to authorize schools from local boards of education. Instead, it may be a reason for that local board to refine its authorizing and monitoring practices to reduce the likelihood of revocation in the future.

³⁹ *Id.* at 184. Barber explained this in the context of government receipt of freight train cars. “We were told routinely that the introduction of new rolling stock always led to a drop in performance. Only after we had been able to show that new rolling stock provided by the same supplier to railways in some other countries did not have the same baleful effect was action taken. The supplier was summoned and informed that what had been accepted in the past from now on be seen as intolerable. Quite rapidly, performance for the new rolling stock improved, demonstrating one of the major weaknesses in government—that contracted out services are often managed poorly.”

⁴⁰ Tenn. Code Ann. 49-1-201(a).

⁴¹ Tenn. Code Ann. 49-2-203(a)(2).

⁴² Tenn. Code Ann. 49-2-303(b).